

Are you being served?: Exploring consumer perspectives of retail brand integrity and Brand Purpose

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Are you being served?: Exploring consumer perspectives of retail brand integrity

Keywords: Retail branding; brand identity; consumer behaviour; employee conditions; discount pricing; retail competition

Abstract

Retail brand competition is increasing, global competition coupled with the economic crisis of 2008 has impacted on the UK high street; many well-known retailers went into administration and others are streamlining with store closures and redundancies. The expansion of discount retailers may appeal to price sensitive consumers, but this has incurred allegations of exploiting producers. In the past, research has found that consumers consider that workers in developing countries cannot expect the same salaries and working conditions as western-workers but more recently there have been allegations that UK employees are exploited with low pay and poor working conditions. With discount retailers appearing to grow their market-share in this price sensitive climate, it seems that retailers who have attempted to install stronger brand identity through better quality products, superior customer service and stable employment are suffering from applying integrity to their business practice. However, there also seems to be a backlash against businesses that focus on the 'race to the bottom' and the impact this has on society. This research seeks to explore how consumers perceive the integrity of retail brand identity and how that translates into a buying decision. To do this, focus groups that target Baby Boomers and Generation X will examine consumers interpretation and perceptions of four retail brands will be considered: middle-market retailers John Lewis and M&S that communicate customer service, product quality and enhanced employee conditions will be contrasted against Primark and Sports Direct, which both focus on low pricing.

Extended abstract

Over the last decade, established retailers on the UK high street have experienced turbulence (Hopkins, 2009), with some well-known names, such as Woolworths and BHS going into receivership. Much of this was attributed to the global economic crisis in 2008; however, troubled times continue; recently John Lewis reported on profit loss, M&S and Debenhams both announced job cuts and store closures, and House of Fraser was bought over by Mike Astley of Sports Direct, which has resulted in half the stores closing along with 2000 redundancies (BBC News, 2018). Retail brand competition on the high street is not only from International competitors, but also from online retailers, many of whom can offer lower price points (Thomas, 2018). One such example is Amazon, whose online marketplace promises consumers a platform where they can buy anything they want; yet, much if this seems price driven, as consumers can see all available market options for products and consumers tend to opt for the lowest price. The rise of discount stores on the high street, such as B&M, Poundland and Primark, appears to have been appreciated by consumers, as evidenced in the rise of market share and profit for discount retailers (Hooker, 2018); this may be because consumers are more economically conscious (Hooker, 2018), another hangover from the economic crash a decade ago (Thomas, 2018). Yet, there are disadvantages to eroding price points, such as a reduction in customer service, product quality and homogenous product selection. Moreover, monopolisation of the high street not only reduces retailer selection, it limits economic growth.

Exploitation of workers in developing countries has been alleged for a couple of decades and there has been much media exposure of exploitation in the supply chain, across a number of contexts; for

example, the fashion industry is accused of long hours and low pay for garment-workers in developing countries (Maher, 2015). This also moved to closer to home, for example, the food industry allegedly uses migrant workers for picking fruit, vegetables and sea food in the UK. Yet, more recently exploitation has been levied at the UK workforce, with accusations of low pay and poor working conditions in UK retailers and distribution warehouses (Morrison, 2018). Previous research has sought to examine why consumers continue to purchase from retailers accused of exploiting workers in the supply chain (Iwanow, 2009), and among a number of findings, found that cultural appropriations are applied to workers in developing countries: workers cannot expect the same pay and working conditions as provided in developed countries (Ritch and Brownlie, 2016; Jasiewicz, 2009). However, now that exploitation has been levied at the UK workforce, will that have an impact on retailer choice? There are a number of accusations of unethical practices for UK business, who under the guise of self-employment, shift responsibility for performance and efficiency, as well as sick and holiday pay, to the workers. This so called gig economy has been in the news recently, most notably with DPD being accused of contributing to the death of one of their drivers who was unable to take time off for hospital appointments for fear of being fined (Booth, 2018). There was also criticism at the news that Mike Astley of Sports Direct had purchased House of Fraser, with fears that the high market department store would be replaced with inferior brands, cheap products and that House of Fraser employees will have their working conditions and pay revoked (Morrison, 2018). Efforts to streamline in-store procedures amongst a number of department stores have led to staff reductions, and this has impacted on customer service (Marciniak, 2018) as well as employment insecurity. All of those factors impact on brand perception, loyalty and trust, which can reduce the brand relevance (Stewart, 2018). Similarly, brands such as John Lewis and Marks and Spencer's who market their brands as emulating honesty and integrity use delivery companies such as DPD to deliver their online sales. Although consumers may question paying more for goods and services if they do not see any advantages, would consumers perceive added value and authenticity within brand equity if UK businesses delivered a better in-store experience alongside strengthening the UK economy and focusing on employee conditions?

Given the turbulence of the UK retail sector, retailing brand value may come under greater scrutiny. Consumers today are said to be more socially conscious, and view their consumption practice as expressive of the kind of society that fits with their ideology (Henry, 2018). Although consumers tend to use brands for social positioning, there is a rise in brands moving beyond social issues to taking a political stance (Chadwick and Zipp, 2018). Political discourse has been filtering into consumer behaviours and motivations for a few decades (Kotzur et al., 2017). The motivation behind political consumption is not new, but recent research has indicated that it is increasingly imperative for brands to be socially conscious, not only including concern for the environment or workers in the supply chain, but for improving the economic and social conditions within their community (Wander, 2018). As such, retailers are conduits for ideological positioning and consumers may feel that they can instigate social change through positive consumption with retailers that reflect their moral stance, or boycotting those who do not (Quintelier, 2014). This includes what retailers sell and how they sell it (Jenson, 2004), moving into the debate about whether consumers are simply consumers, or also citizens that have impact on wider society through affecting business practice (Gabriel and Lang, 1995). Recently, global established brands are noting the need to move beyond complacency and make a stance for what is considered the right thing to do (McCarthy, 2018). Retailing brands may focus on aligning with consumer lifestyle needs, but in the current climate this may expand to the political too if consumers view businesses as 'solving political problems' (Jensen, 2004: 440).

The idea that retail brand identity has been used for department stores to differentiate is not new, especially as department stores have a long history in the UK. However, with many retailers opting for the 'race to the bottom' in terms of price, quality, employee conditions and customers service, there may well be a backlash of consumer resistance. Further, given the homogeneity of this approach,

retailer brands may benefit from taking a stance that is appropriate for their heritage and that is uniquely positioned (Marciniak, 2018; Drugstore News, 2016). Middle market brands, such as John Lewis and M&S may focus on engaging with consumers with a superior customer service, in-store events and experiences (Thomas, 2018) while Primark and Sports Direct focus solely on price. This research seeks to explore how customers perceive the integrity of retail branding that includes customer experience, heritage and benefiting the wider UK economy versus price and how that translates into a buying decision. Using focus groups, this research will consider the perspectives of two cohorts: Baby Boomers and Generation X to understand how retail brands can position the brand message to compete on the UK high street. The retailers include John Lewis, M&S, Primark and Sports Direct, covering retailers who focus of quality, value and customer service as well as two which are low price orientated. The research will be of interest to marketing managers who seek to connect with consumers with an authentic brand message that can create market growth in the current retailing sector.

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